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FORUM

The 90s are officially over: Gen X celebrity break-ups

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(Bloomsbury 2015).

The 90s are officially over: Generation X celebrity break-ups

The summer of 2015 witnessed the dissolution of a series of high-profile celebrity relationships: Kourtney Kardashian and Scott Disick announced their separation; Zayn Malik and Perrie Edwards broke off their engagement; Reba McEntire and Narvel Blackstock's 35-year romance ended; and Melanie Griffith and Antonio Banderas finalised their divorce, having married in 1996. When, on August 4, Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy took to Twitter to announce their split – 'after careful thought, thoughtful consideration and considerable squabbling' (@MissPiggy) – several online media outlets pronounced the summer of 2015 'Officially the Summer of Divorce' (Oleksiski 2015) and 'The Summer Love Died' (Peng 2015).

In the midst of all this, three splits were grouped together by the media and positioned as particularly significant: Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale, Jennifer Garner and Ben Affleck, and Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin (the latter announced their split in March 2014 but Paltrow did not file for divorce until April 2015). Each of these couples comprise members of Generation X – 'the divorce generation' – whose childhoods were marked by the US divorce rate reaching its peak in 1980, when the earliest Gen X-ers were hitting their late teens and the latest were just being born (Bump 2014). In this piece we consider the intersection of relationships, nostalgia, and generational identities as structuring elements in celebrity culture, through a small sample of high-profile Gen X examples. The focus here on celebrity relationships – an under-researched area in academic celebrity studies – develops the work undertaken for our edited collection *First Comes Love: Power Couples, Celebrity Kinship and Cultural Politics* (Bloomsbury 2015); while the emphasis on generations both recognises research by Maria Pramaggiore and Linda Ruth Williams on familial relationships

and ageing in that volume and prefigures a book we are writing with Hannah Hamad on Generation X, celebrity and nostalgia.

Numerous cultural commentators – many of them X-ers themselves, now in middle age, and married with children – see this widespread childhood experience of divorce as foundational. Noting that ‘every generation has its life-defining’ question, such as ‘where were you when Kennedy was shot?’, a 2011 essay in *The Wall Street Journal* declares, ‘[For] Generation X there is only one question: “When did your parents get divorced?”’ (Thomas 2011). Meanwhile, *The Christian Science Monitor* references a marketing survey that indicated X-ers are more committed to the ideals of marriage and the nuclear family than Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) or Millennials (born between 1982 and 2004) and suggests that X-ers, by delaying marriage and staying together longer, are trying to avoid the mistakes of their parents who broke up their families and made Generation X the ‘least parented, least nurtured generation in US history’ (Campbell 2004). Furthermore, when Gen X-ers do get divorced, they now tend to be lauded for trying to do that differently than their parents. In July 2015, *Time* magazine declared: ‘Maybe it’s time to stop making fun of “conscious uncoupling”’, observing that X-ers were following Paltrow and Martin’s lead in attempting to ‘succeed in breaking up’ (Schrobsdorff 2015).

The celebrity couples mentioned above, whose fame hit early heights in the 90s, all presented their break-ups as ‘good divorces’. In addition to the Paltrow-Martin’s ‘conscious uncoupling’, Garner and Affleck stated they ‘would go forward in love and friendship’ and that they were committed to co-parenting their children (Tauber and Leonard 2015), a commitment which includes continuing to live on the same estate and taking vacations together (Hood 2015). Similarly, Stefani and Rossdale declared that they ‘remain partners in parenthood’ and ‘committed to raising our three sons in a happy and healthy environment’

(Nessif 2015). Considering all this, we would like to make two main observations about Generation X and celebrity.

First, as some commentators have already suggested, the meanings attached to Generation X have altered significantly in recent years. While in the early 1990s, Douglas Coupland's famous novel *Generation X: Tales for an accelerated culture* (1991) was lauded for capturing the essence of a 'slacker' generation narcissistically rebelling against the strictures of the Boomers, and the front cover of *Time* magazine (16 July 1990) asked if young adults were 'Laid back, late blooming, or just lost', contemporary critics identify an agency in Gen X that was apparently lacking in the past. Christine Henseler, for example, has written recently that X-ers are 'a generation whose worldview is based on change, on the need to combat corruption, dictatorships, abuse, AIDS, a generation in search of human dignity and individual freedom, the need for stability, love, tolerance, and human rights for all' (Henseler 2013, p. 10).

Second, and following the line taken by Jameson (1991, p. 279), the discussion of these relationships should be couched within a discernible recent rise in nostalgia for both the 'historical reality' of the 1990s and a rise in the re-mediation of the milieu of Generation X's youth. In terms of the former, the last decade of the twentieth century is increasingly remembered as a peaceful *fin de siècle*, underpinned by the optimism arising from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the naïve hope that liberal, third-way politics would soften the edges of 1980s *laissez-faire* capitalism. In terms of the latter, the recent rise of remakes and reboots of Generation X media texts signal the shift in agency arising from Gen X-ers maturing into the producers of culture. Such products include *Point Break* (2015), *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (2015), 'The Muppet Show' (2015), 'The X Files' (2016), and 'Twin Peaks' (2017). Furthermore, the 1980s' setting of 'The Americans' (2013) and the 1970s' setting of the second season of ' Fargo' (2014) contribute to the mediated nostalgia for the decades in which

X-ers grew up. The 90s, then, are an alluring reminder of a world free from the anxieties of post-crash capitalism and post-9/11 terror, as well as signifying the final breaths of what now, for many, seems like a more 'authentic' culture before new media and the rise of personal media devices dramatically fragmented our intimate social lives (Turkle, 2015).

As such, following the argument that 'under neoliberalism celebrity relationships serve not only as fantasies of material wealth...but as fantasies of happiness and companionship that conform to a script that is increasingly difficult to follow' (Ewen, 2015: 349), the (ironic) performative mourning over the break-up of Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog links Gen X nostalgia with the power of celebrity couples to speak to our anxieties about and longings for stability, intimacy, and community. If we are to persist in dividing cultural history into decades and/or generations, thinking about the discourses surrounding celebrity relationships and their changing significations over time may be one fresh and productive way of interrogating this phenomenon.

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